

# Building on the Three Rs of Professionalism

by Rick Heckendorn

The insightful article "The Three Rs of Professionalism" by Patricia H. Phelps (*Record* Winter 2006) provided recommendations that dovetail with my own suggestions for beginning teachers as they prepare for successful secondary classroom careers. Phelps focused on the importance of *responsibility, respect, and risk-taking*. I emphasize *planning, content, strategies, caring, flexibility, and assessment*. Accepting a constructivist view of knowledge, this juxtaposition can be instructive and informative.

As a professor of general secondary methods for the past four years, I have modeled the importance of these six crucial components to successful teaching. In short, write out your lesson plans, strive to learn your content thoroughly and remain a lifelong student, vary your strategies to focus on the needs and interest of the students, show you care about the students, exercise flexibility within your plans, and include ongoing formative assessments as you teach. My six factors incorporate responsibility, respect, and risk-taking, which Phelps so ably emphasized.

## Six Components to Successful Teaching

**Planning.** Teachers demonstrate respect for students by working

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diligently to plan exciting lessons, knowing the material thoroughly, and recording what occurs in each class. Planning means providing students with an organizer for each lesson, letting them know what will occur during class, and acknowledging the needs of students with different learning styles, such as visual and holistic learners (Dunn and Dunn 1993). Planning not only keeps the teacher and the students on track, but also is a teacher's key responsibility and a way to demonstrate respect for students.

**Content.** The importance of a teacher's content knowledge should not be minimized. A teacher's responsibility includes reading in the content area, keeping up with professional teaching literature, and committing to lifelong learning. In the classroom, the teacher demonstrates knowledge of content by asking those complex, high-level questions that only can be created by those who have a deep understanding of the curriculum.

Even young middle students sense the depth of knowledge the teacher possesses and the degree of preparation. Though students may have neither the maturity of purpose nor the background information to be charmed with the curriculum set before them (Steinberg 2002), every student deserves the respect of being taught by well-informed teachers.

**Strategies.** Varying active learning strategies for daily lessons is an awesome challenge. For the beginning teacher, the amount of material to be learned, digested, and presented in an interesting and accessible man-

ner can be overwhelming. A teacher must become and remain a reflective practitioner, while developing an individual pedagogy and planning dynamic lessons with exciting strategies (Heckendorn 1996; Osterman and Kottkamp 1993; Schön 1990). Teachers need to catch themselves doing things right and improve on those areas of concern that did not work well for the students.

This ongoing reflective process in the midst of the pressures of lesson planning requires the teacher to attend to students' reactions and react to them. If the educator truly respects and feels responsible to students, reflection can become an integral part of a teacher's strategies for teaching. It is respectful, responsible, and also demonstrates risk-taking to seek like-minded educational professionals with whom to reflect and share.

**Caring.** Caring rightly saturates Phelps's analyses of responsibility and respect. Respect for students begins with knowing their names, acknowledging them, and seeing that everybody listens to each person who speaks (Noddings 1984; Wong and Wong 1998). Because I care about students' self-esteem and development, I will not repeat a student's comment; rather, I ask the student or another student to repeat it. When a teacher repeats a comment, it denigrates the student's valuable voice (Miller 1990).

Teachers need to be present emotionally and intellectually. They must feel a sense of responsibility for their students as they support their efforts

to learn. Caring underlies all of the teacher's actions with students, other teachers, parents, and administration. As Phelps suggested, the teacher becomes the students' advocate. Being honest with students is crucial as we assist them in understanding content and in their development into responsible citizens.

**Flexibility.** During class, the teacher demonstrates flexibility by deviating from the lesson plan to address a "teachable moment" or a student question. Throughout the lesson, the sensitive teacher is assessing how well the students are understanding and reacting to the plan and strategies. Of course, because students learn differently, teaching takes considerable "withitness," as Jacob Kounin called it, to be able to accomplish the balancing act of managing a classroom of some 30 students while at the same time meeting individual needs (Kellough and Kellough 2003).

After class, the teacher reflects on what occurred and revises the plan for the next day. When teachers exhibit flexibility, they present themselves as role models who are real and approachable. Flexibility is a teacher's responsibility; and it demonstrates respect for the students as well as supports their efforts.

**Assessment.** The teacher's responsibility is to do what is possible and necessary to ensure that all students succeed in class. Formative assessment can make this more likely, though nothing is a guarantee. The student ultimately has to take responsibility. For middle school youngsters especially, teachers should attempt to involve parents continually. To increase the likelihood that they will succeed, I even find myself reminding college students of their obligations.

To effectively assess students' learning, teachers must offer choices amid challenges. Students learn differently, have different interests, and are individuals. Thus, students should

have options for assessments to demonstrate, in varying ways, that they have learned the material. I recommend at least two choices for every homework assignment as a personal goal for each teacher. In addition to

focusing on students' interests and needs in our teaching strategies, we should be doing the same in our formative and summative assessments.

### Respect, Responsibility, Risk-Taking

The teacher can exhibit respect for students by planning active learning strategies that help students reflect and realize what they do and do not understand. This respect and support for students can assist them as they take on more personal responsibility that will serve them well throughout life. This course of classroom action can entail risks for educators in today's atmosphere of accountability, because a teacher can be labeled soft rather than hard, caring rather than demanding, supportive rather than challenging, collaborative rather than pushing for greater independence. However, effective teachers can demand and care, support as they challenge, and provide for collaborative and individual learning experiences.

Teachers take a risk every time they teach a lesson in an unusual way. Occasionally, I bring my portable piano to class and sing a selection that relates directly to the content. Usually the class sings along. Students

see another approach to learning the material as we maintain active student participation. Each class entails a risk, but also a thrill when students' interests are ignited by a fresh approach. Teachers take risks as they hope to

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inspire the question they had never considered before.

Teachers also take risks when they go to other teachers to exchange ideas and reveal things that they do not know. New teachers should seek out like-minded, inquisitive, lifelong learners among the faculty of their school, district, and beyond, because all educators need advice, assistance, and support from fellow professionals. This is one of the most important reasons educators go to conferences and belong to professional organizations like Kappa Delta Pi. ■

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